Early history of flying foxes in the Barmoya district near Rockhampton, central Queensland

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INTRODUCTION

The following information about the flying fox camp at Barmoya was gained from a series of interviews with people who have first-hand knowledge of the history of the Barmoya area from its earliest European settlement.

I first met Ernie Gomersall in 1956 when a girl of 10 and over the years have learnt a lot from Ernie about the Barmoya district and surrounds, as it was when first settled. The Gomersall family settled in East Barmoya at the turn of the century and members of the Gomersall family still own the original selection. Ernie, their eldest son, was born in 1909.

I have spoken to Garn Hatch many times about the early history of the area. He was born in 1900 and his family settled in the district in 1904. Garn has lived in the area all his life and still visits the family farm weekly to help his son in whatever capacity he can. I have driven around the Barmoya area many times with Ernie, and a couple of times with Garn, and have been shown the areas they have been telling me about.

Mrs Jones I only met once through Ernie in 1991 and unfortunately she passed away a short time afterwards, at the age of 90. Mrs Jones (nee Thomasson) was also a daughter of one of the pioneering families and lived her entire life in the area. Up until a short time before her passing she was still able to drive her car and was able to supervise the movement of her cattle.

I have spoken to Jack Farr a number of times over the phone about the flying fox camp and have visited him and his wife a number of times for more information. He too has lived in the area all his life and is now in his seventies.

Jay Stroup I also met through Ernie Gomersall and spoke to him only twice in person, and by phone twice, about the flying foxes which were on his property. His family bought land in the Barmoya area about 1916.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE EARLY BARMOYA AREA

The Barmoya district is situated about 30 km north of Rockhampton in central Queensland (Fig. 1). The first families arrived in the late 1800s and by 1910 more than 1 300 acres (526 ha) was settled.

The district was mostly covered with thick "Softwood Scrub", as the locals called it. On the survey map it was called "dense vine scrub" *(semi-evergreen vine thicket)*, which in places was so thick that you could barely crawl through it. This vegetation type mostly grew on the rich, red volcanic (Basalt Flow), and on the good chocolate soils which in places reached a depth of between 10 and 30 feet (3–9.1 m). The vine scrubs were mostly characterized by "a high species diversity, a closed canopy, often dense understorey, and a light fuel load at ground level" (Hoy 1993). There was also a large area of Belah *Casuarina cristata* growing in the heavy "black soil" areas. Teatree *Melaleuca bracteata* and various other paper barks mostly grew on the permanently swampy areas in water 1–2 ft deep (300–600 mm) which covered an area of several thousand acres. It was only in the dry seasons that the Teatree Swamps were ring barked, mostly between 1922 and 1936, and some much later. Large areas of Queensland Blue Gum or Forest Red Gum *Eucalyptus tereticornis* also grew in swamp areas and on the flood plains where the soils were heavier. During flood rains this flood plain could be 3 miles (5 km) or more across. Mahogany *Lophostemon suaveolens* and Gum-top Box *Eucalyptus moluccana* grew between the scrub and the swamp areas. Moreton Bay Ash *E. tessellaris* grew on the lighter alluvial soils on the creek banks. On the open woodlands the duplex soils carried the Narrow-leafed Ironbark *E. creba* and Poplar Box *E. populnea*. The vegetation supported a wide range of wildlife, and flying foxes can be heard today feeding in the area when the remaining gums are in blossom.

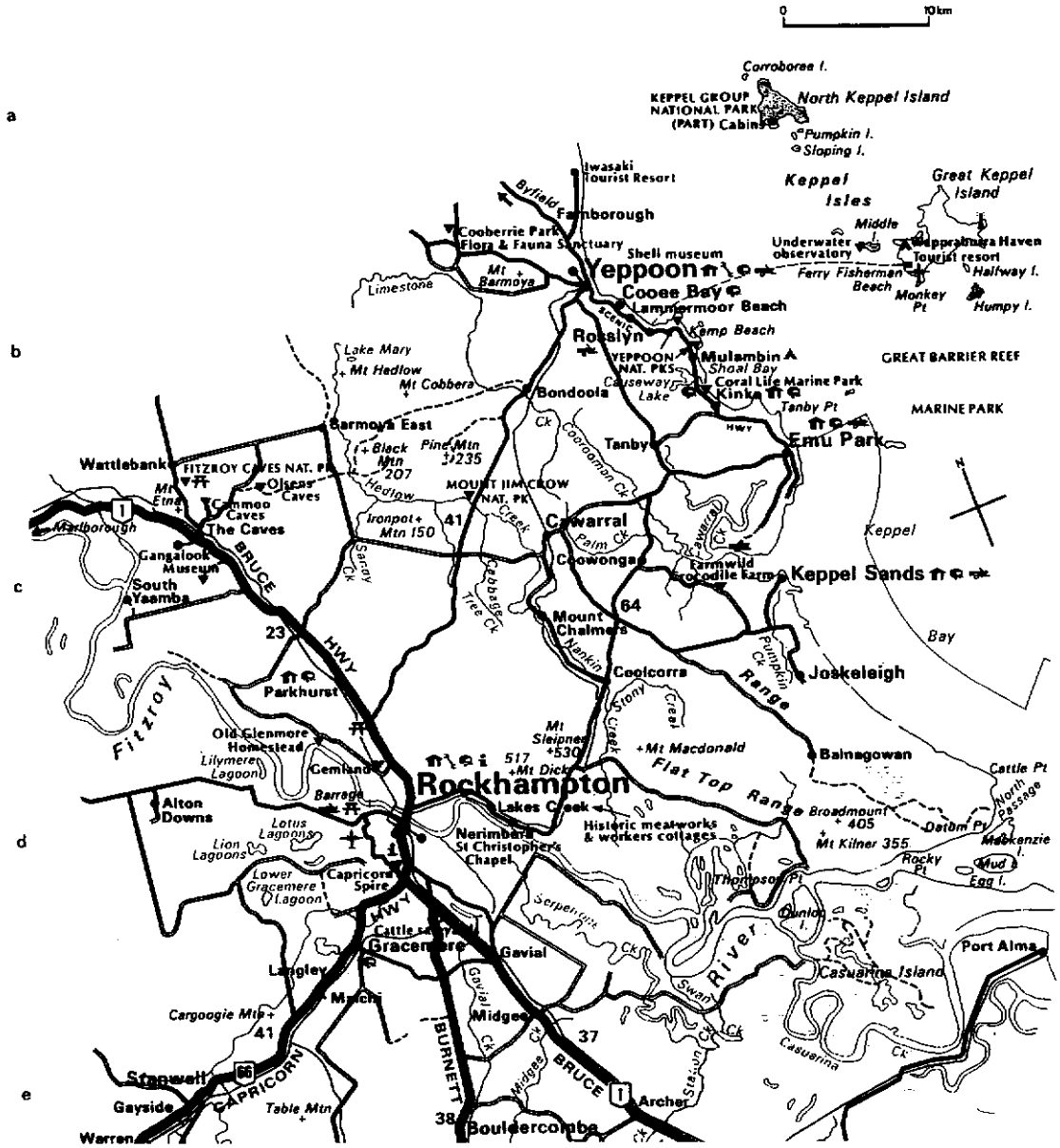


Figure 1. This map shows Barmoya in relation to Rockhampton and Yeppoon, "Reproduced with permission from Reader's Digest (Australia) Pty Ltd from the book *Motoring Guide to Australia*".

Although droughts were experienced as early as 1902, the area does seem to have become drier and the seasons have changed, sometimes having a lot of rain such as floods over a short period, followed by several years with lower than average rainfall. The 1902 drought was considered by the early settlers to be the most severe recorded in this area. Hedlow Creek divided into several holes, a phenomena which has not occurred since. 1946 and 1951 were also severe drought years. Ernie Gomersall was told by his mother that during the 1902 drought when Hedlow Creek was only a few waterholes, dingoes would run through the water to muddy it up to catch the fish that came to the surface. As a school boy from 1904–1914 Garn Hatch remembers regular very heavy storm activity from October until after Christmas, followed by the wet season. He said the storms we occasionally get today are nothing in comparison to the storms experienced back then. Garn Hatch said when he was farming you could rely on good rain at Christmas and some more rain in winter mostly around June which would carry you through all year. "It is a good 50 years since we have had storms like those", he remembers. Children would be sent home early from school if it appeared a storm was coming or they would be caught between flooding creeks and be unable to get home. In those days, there were no culverts or bridges across the creeks, and only a bridle track through the thick vegetation. A couple of

creeks, at the Rockhampton end of Barmoya, that Garn remembers as a boy flowed with some deep waterholes full of fish and good swimming holes, are now either silted up or very close to it, with only a few shallow stagnant pools. Hedlow Creek, which is in the floodplain, was the only permanent water supply at East Barmoya and settlers carted water in tanks on drays and wagons. In good seasons the creek flooded several times a year. Since the advent of the salt problem farmers and graziers have become more dependent on this source of water than ever before.

The salt problem became evident very early at Barmoya when salty ground water started coming to the surface and killing huge areas of trees in the floodplain and swamps. One such area is known as "The Dead Sea" by locals, and it was between 1920 and 1930 that trees started dying there. It could have been as early as around 1910 that other large areas of Blue Gum first started dying in the swamp along Greenlake Road (see R.241, Camping and Water Reserve) but most people believe it to have been much later, around the 1940s, that this started to occur when the higher ground was cleared and cultivated. Some areas in East Barmoya were never suitable for wells as the gorund water was brackish.

Gomersall's dam went salty about 1938 when the ground water came up through the clay. After a 1924 earth tremor at Barmoya, Hatch's well, which was in solid rock 114 feet deep (34.7 m) with 14 feet (4.2 m) of good water, rose to within 40 feet (12.1 m) of the surface and was as salty as sea water. A number of farmers have planted salt tolerant marine couch *Sporobolus virginicus* on the salt-affected areas. This species the cattle will eat if nothing better is available, it will keep them alive but not fatten them. Mr Farr said they mostly eat it after winter when the other grasses have been frosted.

From the late 1800s until at least the early 1930s and in some cases much later, clearing of scrub was done by hand, with tools such as the axe, mattock and shovel, and later burned. Animal life was in abundance: wallabies, possums, koalas, bats, birds, etc. Ernie recalls the "Gum Trees" having deep heavy marks in the trunks from koalas and scratch-marks from possums.

FLYING FOX CAMP

A number of descendants of the first settlers of Barmoya are still living in the area and some on their original selections. It is from these people that I have gained the information regarding the "Flying Fox Camp" that was once in the East Barmoya area. Some of these people are now in their late eighties and early nineties. They all recall the camp being there from the time they could remember as small children. Some say there were millions of them while others say hundreds of thousands. One estimate was 500 000, I have no way of knowing how this number was arrived at. Their roost was in the dense vine scrub, and although the actual camp covered between 10 and 15 acres (4–6 hectares) or maybe more (E. Gomersall, pers. comm.), the periodically shifted anywhere over a 60 acre (24 ha) to 100 acre (40 ha) area. Another estimate was about 5 acres (2 ha) at a time and moving about periodically over the 60 acre (24 ha) paddock.

There were two different species, a large black one which was there all the year round and a small reddish brown that was only there for part of the year, the time of year unknown. When they left the roost at dusk the large black ones would fly across very low down and the small reddish brown ones higher up (Mr Farr, pers. comm.).

At dusk when they all left the camp, "it was like a big black funnel 50 yards (45.7 m) or more across before they spread out and you could hear the whoosh of their wings as they flew over low" (E. Gomersall, direct quote).

"Thousands and thousands of them. It was just like a thunderstorm when they started coming out, you would think it was thunder when they flapped their wings going down to the creek", (see Fig. 2, Hedlow Creek). "About four o'clock in the morning they would be back and you could hear the noise again" (Mrs Jones, direct quote). When Mrs Jones was a girl in the early 1900s the house she lived in was in the direct flight path, some kilometres away, (see Fig. 2, Portion 3v, S. Thomasson). The noise during the day was deafening and those that stayed behind in the roost at night were also noisy.

On occasions some of the locals would spend a day shooting them with shotguns and at times children with "shang-hais" and pea rifles would also shoot them, but no decline in numbers was noticed. From what I have been told they were not a crop pest locally but individual fruit trees were raided. The shooting was mostly for sport, or a days outing and only happened every once in a while, and sometimes only on the spur of the moment. No deliberate attempts were made to eradicate them. Flying foxes in Queensland were not protected until 29 March 1984 and on 29 June 1989 they were removed from the protected species list. It is hoped that they will again be given some form of protection in the near future. People also had the enjoyment of

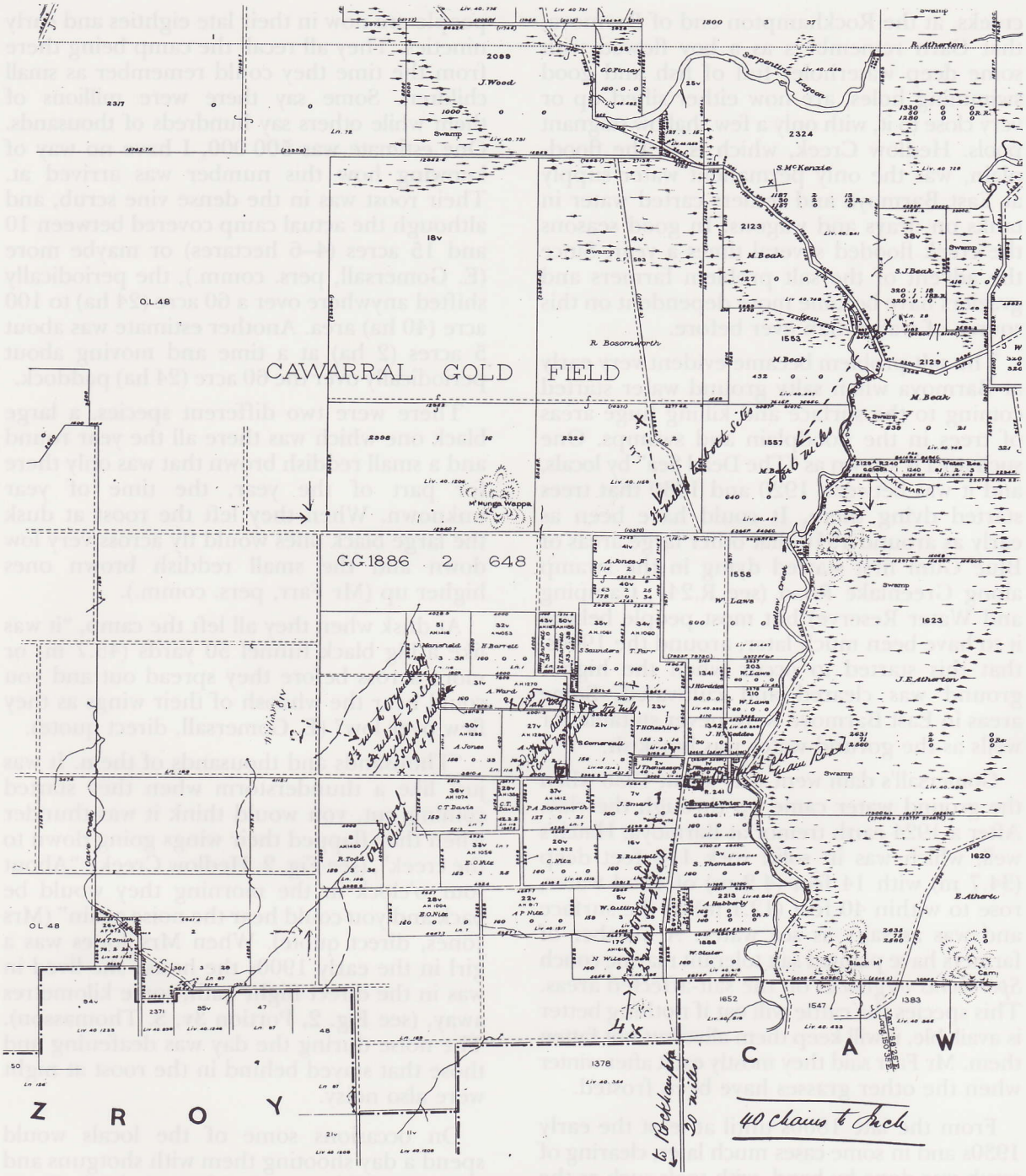


Figure 2. This map of Cawarral Gold Fields came from the Queensland Government Archives and shows the selections taken out by the early settlers. The map was attached to a letter from the Secretary, Barmoya East State School Committee, 23 February, 1910. Map reproduced with permission from the Department of Lands, Queensland.

Captions for page opposite:

A. A remnant of semi-evergreen vine thicket located at Spring Creek, The Caves, on what used to be a Camping and Water Reserve, and is now the rodeo grounds. This is very similar to the vegetation, dense vine scrub, that grew in the East Barmoya area.

B. Dead Blue Gum stand *(Eucalyptus tereticornis)* in an area where the salty ground water rose to the surface of the swamps on Greenlake Road. (See Fig. 1. R. 241). Garn Hatch in the foreground.

C. Remnant Belah and semi-evergreen vine thicket in a lane at Barmoya.

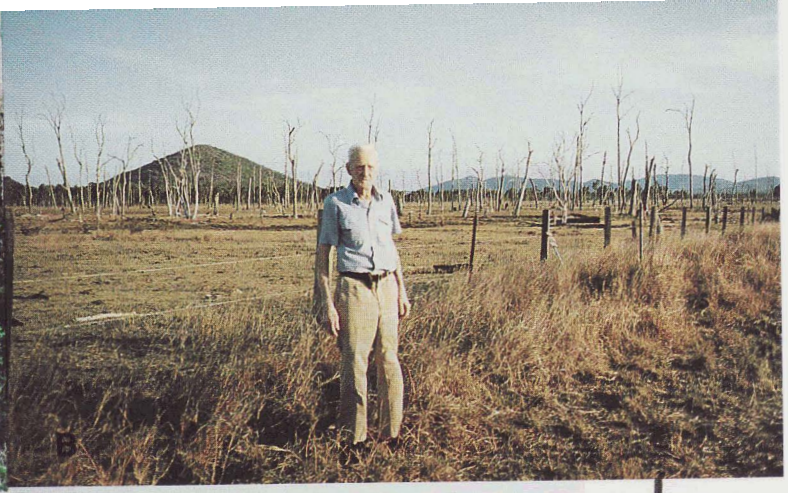
D. A natural halophytic shrub, *Sarcocornia quinqueflora*, growing in saline waterlogged soil. The areas in photos 2 and 4 are just opposite each other with Greenlake Road in between (see Fig. 1. Portion 7 v, J. Smart).

E. The Caves District Landcare Association Watertable Watch. The White on the ground is a crust of salt. The gentleman in the photo is Garn Hatch.

F. Watertable test well with the natural salt tolerant *Sarcocornia quinqueflora* and planted *Casuarina glauca* in the background.

G. The creek where Garn Hatch fished and swam as a boy.

H. The same creek where Garn Hatch fished and swam as a boy. The grass on the left was once part of a deep waterhole, were you could always catch fish.



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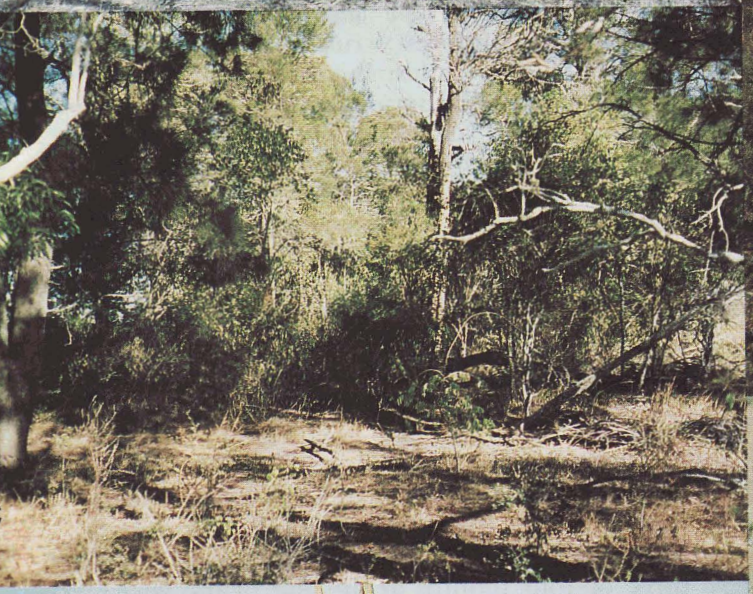

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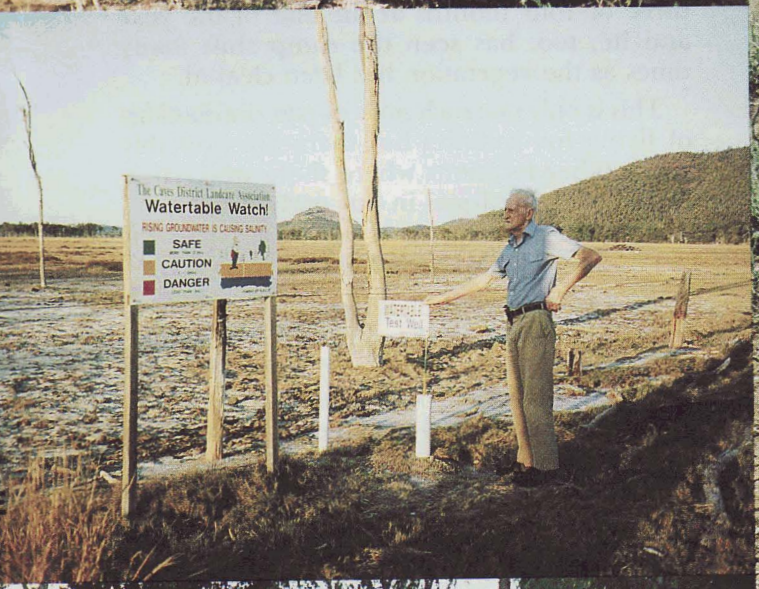
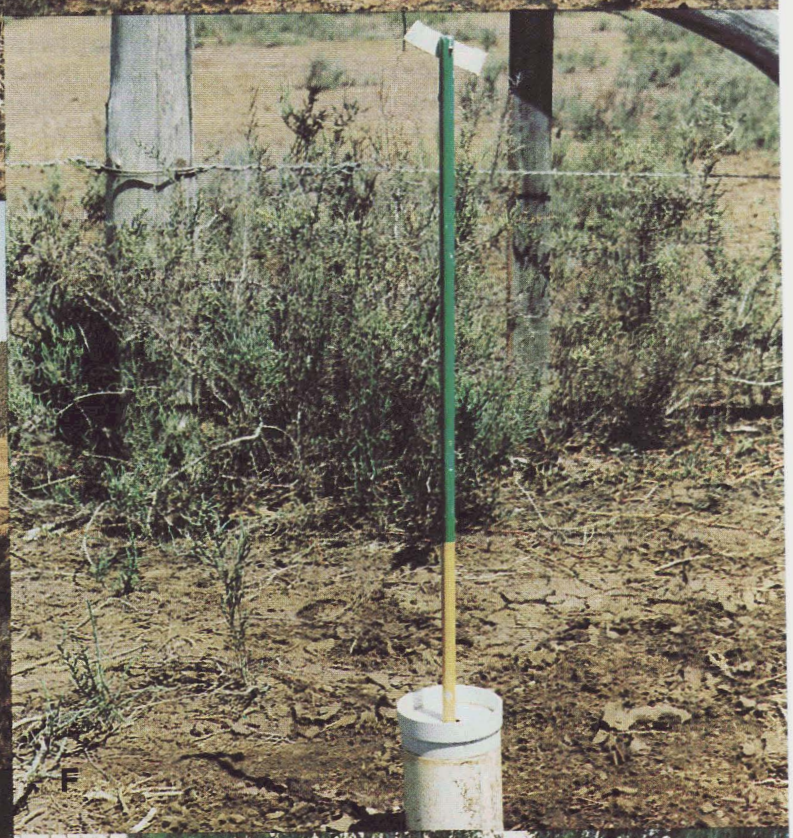

The Caves District Landcare Association
Watertable Watch!
RISING GROUNDWATER IS CAUSING SALINITY
SAFE
CAUTION
DANGER



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I. Carting water from Hedlow Creek about 1927 Bill Saunders driving, left to right: Harry and Arthur Farr, Charlie Thomasson and Jack Farr. (Photo from Mrs J. Farr.) Jack Farr said the trees in the background were probably Blue Gum *(Eucalyptus tereticornis).*

walking a short distance off East Barmoya Road to admire them. This road was at first a bridle track later enlarged to take horse drawn vehicles and today a gravel road. The vegetation came right up to the road and the flying foxes could be clearly seen by just walking a short distance into the scrub.

By about 1935 a good deal of the Barmoya district had been cleared but not the area where the bats roosted. It was not until 1948 that the owner of the land where the flying fox camp was located (Fig. 2, Portion 30v, A. Jones) began clearing, little by little. As it was done by hand it was not until 1953 that the job was complete. With the last few trees felled went the last of this camp of flying foxes. There is no flying fox camp in the district today. All to whom I have spoken remember them being there until the vegetation was removed in the early 1950s. No information is available as to what happened to the camp after that. Flying foxes still feed in the area when the remaining gums are in blossom and on fruiting and flowering trees that people have planted on their properties.

J. Two early settlers cutting the scrub by hand. Photo supplied by Mrs J. Miller, who got it from her mother, who got it from one of the gentlemen in the photo. Photo probably taken in the very early 1900s. Note the "scrub" is vine scrub, also called "softwood scrub" by early settlers and "dense vine scrub" on maps of early blocks of land. This was Flying Fox habitat although there were no records on this particular selection.

As there is no way of knowing for sure what species were at Barmoya it is possible they may have been *Pteropus scapulatus* and *Pteropus alecto,* or perhaps *Pteropus poliocephalus,* they are said to have had a huge wingspan. No one can remember any of them having grey fur.

From early September until around Christmas, a camp of Little Reds *Pteropus scapulatus* and the Black Fruit Bat *Pteropus alecto* roost in some remnant dry rainforest scrub of properties at Milman. Milman is a farming community about 20 km north-west of Barmoya. Mr Dan Keleher, a local resident, said he has known them to be there every year for at least 28 years. He said they have shifted camp to several localities at Milman as the dry rainforest scrub has been cleared. Living at Milman for 28 years and in the district for 40 years, Mr Keleher has seen many dead flying foxes that got caught on barb-wire fences. All those that he has seen have been the small reddish brown ones and the big black ones. He said none of those that he has seen have had any grey fur on them. Another resident Mr Walker Loose, 96 years of age, has lived at Milman for 84 years. He remembers the flying foxes coming every year for at least 80 years. He said they come for three or four months at the end of the year and he, too, has seen the camp shift many times as the vegetation has been cleared.

This is only one such story of past distributions of flying fox colonies but there are probably many other locations where there were large camps of flying foxes in our early history.

REMINISCENCES

Mr Ernest Gomersall, 85 years, pers. comm., from 1960–1994. Mr Farr, pers. comm., 1994. Mr J. Stroup, pers. comm., 1991 and 1994. Mr Garn Hatch, 94 years, pers. comm., 1992 to 1994. Mrs Jones, deceased, 90 years, pers. comm., 1991.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

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